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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9439
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 0090
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 0195
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 0791
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 0199

C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENNA 000165

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2023

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MEPP](#) [SY](#) [AU](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY REQUESTS FM PLASSNIK CANCEL SYRIA VISIT

REF: TRICK-KILNER E-MAIL 2/1/08

Classified By: CDA Scott Kilner. Reason: 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) In response to REF request, Econ/Pol Counselor and PolChief called 2/1 on Austrian MFA Deputy Director for ME Affairs, Christoph Meran, to raise USG concerns about FM Plassnik,s planned Feb. 7-9 visit to Damascus. The visit is prt of a larger ME tour, including Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. ME Director Scheide, who will accompany Plassnik, was returning from official travel and unavailable for a meeting. However, Meran promise to convey our concerns to Scheide and t the Minister immediately upon Scheide,s return o the office later that afternoon. Meran also indicated that USG concerns would probably be reviewe by the cabinet.

¶2. (C) Counselor informd Meran that the USG was concerned by Plassnik,s plan to visit Damascus, noting that engagement by some EU diplomats had not produced a positive Syrian response. The U.S. would welcome a decision to drop the Damascus stop. The USG was also concerned at the lack of advance consultation (in contrast to the advance notice provided before President Fischer's December trip to Damascus), especially given Vienna,s stated interest in playing a greater role in ME diplomacy and, specifically, in possible follow-up to the Annapolis Conference. Meran initially suggested that the Damascus trip was not yet confirmed, but after consulting with other ME Department staff, reported that two meetings were confirmed: with the Foreign Minister and with the Vice-President. A meeting with President Assad had been requested but not confirmed.

¶3. (C) Upon his return to the office, ME Director Scheide called Charge to confirm the U.S. message. Charge reiterated USG concerns, drawing from ref e-mail points, and noting that the U.S. regarded any senior-level travel by western, not just Austrian, officials to Damascus as inappropriate now. Charge reminded Scheide that engagement with the German and Dutch FonMins had been followed by the arrest of Riad Seif. In light of these problems, the Charge urged the Austrians to reconsider going to Damascus.

¶4. (C) Scheide said bluntly that this was "out of the question," arguing that an Austrian visit to Damascus was consistent with the U.S. invitation to Syria to attend the Annapolis Conference. Charge noted the unique character of the Annapolis event and that Syria's actions since then have not been constructive. Scheide stressed Syria's importance to the peace process and that Plassnik would stick to the EU's agreed message, urging constructive Syrian engagement. He also noted that Austria had rejected Iranian FM Mottaki's request to visit Vienna, which not all EU capitals had done. In a clear allusion to Austria's desire to play a more visible role in the post-Annapolis peace process, Scheide

said that he would not want U.S.-Austrian differences over this visit to become a burden on "related matters." The Charge reiterated that the visit was not a good idea.

13. (C) Charge will meet MFA Political Director Mayr-Harting and Chancellery Diplomatic Advisor Wrable on February 4 and will again raise U.S. concerns regarding the visit. Scheide also promised a readout after the trip.
Kilner